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ABSTRACT

The curriculum guide presented in this paper promotes a nurturing environment that facilitates the development of the total child. The program is designed to be used by teachers, administrators, and parents in both public and private school settings. The philosophy of the program is experimentalist-cognitive. A number of proposals relevant to curriculum development are made. Proposals are: (1) the organizational structure for learning should be heterogeneous, nongraded, and multiage; (2) the school schedule should be flexible; (3) an integrated curriculum should include teacher-student planning, active exploration, and play; (4) teachers must be sensitive to each student as a unique individual; (5) children should be taught acceptance of one another; and (6) all elements of a program should be evaluated for consistency with program goals. (BC)

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First Steps

A Curriculum Plan for Early Childhood Education

written by
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Overview:

First Steps is an early childhood curriculum guide that promotes a safe and nurturing environment that facilitates the development of the total child. The guide focuses on the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children. No one area of development is valued or stressed at the expense of another. The curriculum plan is conceptualized and presented from Kohlburg and Mayer's (1972) interpretation of the progressive educational philosophical view and from the developmentalist learning theory of Piaget. This plan is consistent with the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (1986) position statements on developmentally appropriate education for young children.

The program is designed to be used by certified professional early childhood teachers, school administrators, and parents as a guide in the development of an early childhood education program. There is no "cookbook" content provided in this plan. Educational content should be dynamic and provide the opportunity for teacher and students to plan cooperatively.

The program is developmentally appropriate for children, ages four through eight, who enrolled in a formal learning setting. The

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program aims toward the creation of a learning environment that strives to create the opportunity for all learning experiences to be age and individual appropriate. Much of the information in this guide can be generalized to the education of all learners.

The program guide can be used successfully in the public or private school setting. The school is viewed as a continuation of a learning environment that starts in the home. Education is considered a partnership between and among the teacher, parents, and child. The best interest of the child is the cornerstone of the relationship between the home and school. The child is the reason for the organized learning experience and all decisions related to the school must reflect the child's best interest.

Organization:

First Steps proposes that the organizational structure for learning be heterogenous, non-graded, and multi-age. Group sizes should be limited to approximately twelve children for each teacher. A group should be large enough to allow children to measure their ideas against the ideas of others, yet small enough to allow personalized learning.

To insure that all children have an opportunity for maximizing their educational opportunities, the schedule should be flexible. Some children will benefit from a full school day program, with the option for before and after school programs. Other children will benefit best from a full day or half day school programs without a before or after school program. There may be

children that would benefit most from a two or three full day or half day school program. Individual backgrounds, home environments, and parental wishes are factors that should contribute to scheduling students.

The inclusion of program assistance and enhancement from paraprofessionals, volunteer parents, seniors, and teenagers is encouraged. The inclusion of the skills and knowledge of others will provide a greater opportunity for personal interaction and diversity in role models. All persons working directly with children should attend school sponsored workshops that address school goals, philosophy and appropriate interactions that is consistent with the desired environment for children. These workshops should be personalized to the specific needs of the school and the support persons.

The space provided for classes should be inviting, warm, and stimulating. Young learners need space for movement, therefore, the classrooms should be large enough to provide room for children to move about freely. Classrooms should accommodate several learning centers and small private nooks. Locker spaces will be needed for the personal belongings of students. Tables are recommended for work areas. It is desirable to tone down the traditional steel and chrome institutional appearance.

<u>The Curriculum:</u>

The curriculum should encourage children to work at different levels, for different periods of time, on varied activities.

Optimal student-teacher planning is important. An integrated, developmentally appropriate curriculum is the goal. Learning is not the mastery of narrowly defined subject content. Learning is facilitated through activities that are most appropriate when they are integrated and stimulate total child development. An activity that stimulates one dimension of development and learning also affects other dimensions.

An appropriate curriculum plan is based on the teacher's observations and recordings of each child's special interest and developmental progress. Curriculum goals and plans are based on regular assessment of individual needs, strengths, and interests. Planning should reflect an emphasis on learning as an interactive process.

The environment should be prepared to encourage children to learn to learn through active exploration and interaction with materials, other children and adults. Activities should be designed to concentrate on furthering emerging skills through creative activity and involvement. Emphasis is not on finished products or "correct" answers. Activities and materials should be concrete, real and relevant to the learner.

Children learn through their play. Therefore, play is an accepted and valued part of the early childhood curriculum. One key to facilitating learning is to select a variety of learning materials that involve all modalities of learning. The materials should be carefully displayed to encourage interest that allows self direction in an interactive learning experience.

Learning, the Teacher, and the Student:

Learning is a process of exploration and creation of personal meaning. The learning process must be highly personal. Learning has not only to do with what a teacher does, or says, or provides, but also with what it means in the unique world of the learner. The learning process should be "meaning" oriented by jointly planned, as well as teacher planned activities. Activities should provide each class member an opportunity to bring facts and information to bear on his/her perceptual world.

In a wholesome classroom atmosphere, facts and information are important and are the raw materials for new and exciting ways of viewing the world. Teachers must be keenly sensitive to students, and help them find ways of expressing their needs rather than dictating to them what their needs should be. The teacher must develop learning situations based upon exploration and the discovery of meaning rather than the "telling" of facts (Combs, 1962). Children need to see themselves as achievers and contributors in the learning process.

The teacher who uses the essence of this guide must like children and enjoy the challenge and process of teaching. The teacher is expected to use his/her professional training to ascertain the appropriate use of methods and materials to provide an atmosphere that promotes maximum opportunities for learning. Teaching is a way of being with children (Dobson, Dobson, and Koetting, 1985).

The teacher has much power over his/her students and has the potential to influence children for a lifetime. The professional teacher must make all academic decisions, and all affective decisions in light of what is best for the total child. If one area must suffer, the professional must first protect the child's self-esteem. The author of this guide suggests that children can learn academic content and skills later, but when the self-images of children are shaken healing and unlearning is required. To unlearn is much more difficult than to learn. Many more people have suffered injury to their self-image in traditional school settings than people who have regularly attended school and are still functionally illiterate.

Combs (1962) suggests that knowledge is perception and that each person is selective in their perceptions. First Steps values each child as a unique individual. Children are not to be labeled in school as two dimensional beings. Each child has his/her own personality that reflects infinite dimensions and complexity. To view children as smart or dumb, fast or slow, pretty or ugly, pleasant or unpleasant devalues children and their uniqueness. The professional teacher is challenged to perceive and appreciate the process, quality, and potential to learn and be that are innately unique in all children.

First Steps encourages the teacher to trust children to seek knowledge and to choose wisely. The teacher is to be the child's guide and facilitator through the learning process. Children learn

not only from success but also from errors. Errors are a tool that can teach children to evaluate and reflect on the learning process.

Evaluation:

All aspects of a program that is guided by this plan should be evaluated in terms of consistency with the goals and the philosophy of the program. The quality of the program can best be evaluated by observing children for involvement and joy in the learning process. The reluctant learner is announcing that his/her needs are not being met. When observations suggest reluctance in learning, additional evaluation is indicated, and appropriate changes made.

The teachers should use self-evaluation, and the invited evaluations of other teachers and professionals. Evaluations should be formative. Are teachers achieving what they intended to achieve? Are pedagogy and the environment consistent with the philosophy and goals of the program? Teachers should set personal and professional goals and formulate a plan for growth. Professional development should be addressed from the developmentalist perspective, such as stages of teacher development (Fuller, 1969; Sprinthall, 1983; Katz, 1985).

Student evaluation should be individual and consistent with program and personal goals. Self-evaluation is encouraged. The evaluation of individual students should be multi-dimensional. Multi-dimensional evaluation provides a more through and accurate

portrayal of a complex learner. Personalized criterion referenced evaluations could be helpful if results are examined for congruency with teacher observations. Any evaluation should be used to strengthen the total learning situation. There are no pass/fail situations, but merely a taking stock and making appropriate adjustments.

Affective Education:

First Steps values the acceptance of the children by the teacher and by each other. This guide promotes only one classroom rule: The Golden Rule. When a child acts out inappropriate behavior, the teacher and students should not accept the inappropriate behavior. However, it is important to convey acceptance of the student and convey the message that everyone is still learning to live by the class rule. Children also should be taught, that their experiences are not as vast as the teacher's experiences. Therefore, children must trust the teacher to set limits for safety and order in the learning environment. The teacher must not abuse this trust.

Much emphasis is currently placed on how people are different. This guide stresses that all people are more alike than they are different. The handicapped child, the American minority, the foreign born are all more like the majority than they are different. This program stresses the use of likenesses for the development of interpersonal trust and the identification of differences to establish individuality or uniqueness.

Learning is very personal and much of our self-image is defined in the school setting. The teacher should not ignore likenesses and differences in learning. The teacher should create an environment that conveys a message, that we share the likeness of all people are learners. How, what, when and rate of learning are differences. Differences establish our uniqueness or individuality as learners. Learning is not a competitive sport; it is an individual process of giving meaning to our perspective, not value to our personage.

Philosophy:

The philosophy for this guide is steeped in the progressive ideology of the aims of education as identified by Kohlberg and Mayer, (1972). This philosophy is Experimentalist-Cognitive and is reaching toward an Existentialist-Humanist view. This guide embraces the developmental theories of Piaget. The intent of this guide encompasses the positions of quality early childhood education as stated in the position paper presented by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (June, 1986). The views of learning and the learner are similar to the views of Arthur Combs. The teacher, the child and the learning environment are humane and promote intra and interpersonal human awareness and growth. Research suggests that interactive learning may produce long lasting positive effects on the learner. (Schweinhart, Weikart, and Larner, 1986.) An interactive approach is the core of this guide.

All educational decisions are value based. It is important to identify the values that support various educational positions. The author of this plan values educational decisions that are supportive of the following perspective: The classroom is the home of a family of learners. The classroom environment should promote safety and freedom to learn. The teacher is a guide in the learning experience. All people are students involved in the process of learning. People learn by the creation of their own understanding of the meaning of human live and how we can best live together.

Program Goals:

Guide children in the process of learning the meaning of life and how we as humans can best live together.

Guide children toward the eventual attainment of higher levels of development.

Guide children in intra and inter-human understanding and growth.

Provide children a high quality early childhood program that promotes a safe and nurturing environment.

Provide the opportunity for long term affective and cognitive learning for children by providing developmentally appropriate and child initiated learning experiences.

Establish a symbiotic relationship between the home and school that promotes the best interest of the child.

Summary:

This document is a curriculum plan for the development of an early childhood education program. It is intended as a guide in the cooperative conceptualization and implementation of

developmentally appropriate educational experiences for young children (PK-2). It is written from an Experimentalist-Cognitive paradigm and is consistent with the 1986 position statements of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. As with all suggestions for education, professionals should critically evaluate the merits of this guide for philosophical congruency. Professionals, also, should identify problematic issues that will affect the lived experiences of children.

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